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"As Long as There's Me. As Long as There's You": Trauma and Migration in David Bowie's Berlin Triptych

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Abstract: This essay explores David Bowie's so-called "Berlin Triptych": *Low*, *"Heroes"*, and *Lodger*. The essay takes issue with previous interpretations that have claimed that the albums do not form a "triptych" of any meaningful kind, and that this pretentious term was only applied ex post facto as a marketing strategy. At the heart of my argument is the concept and experience of migration. In the mid-1970s David Bowie was living in Los Angeles at a highpoint of fame and acclaim. His life, however, was also an increasingly hellish nightmare of delusion, paranoia, and cocaine psychosis. In order to save his music, and his life, the singer decamped to Europe. For the next several years he lived an itinerant life with Berlin at its centre. The experience of displacement, and a series of encounters that this displacement facilitated (with the European new wave and a longer tradition of avant-garde modernism), led to both a reshuffling of the self and a radical new sound. The "triptych" tells the story of this progression, both narratively and sonically.

Keywords: David Bowie; Berlin; triptych; trauma; displacement; migration; new wave; modernism

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Since their release in the late 1970s, considerable ink has been spilled on discussions of David Bowie's so-called "Berlin Triptych": *Low*, "*Heroes*", and *Lodger*. While critics have typically ranked these albums among Bowie's strongest and have even seen them as among the finest in rock history, complaints and criticisms have also prevailed.[1] Among these, two have become almost canonical in any consideration of these records. First, it is argued that the albums do not form a "triptych" of any meaningful kind, and that this pretentious term was only applied ex post facto as a marketing strategy. Second, it is claimed that *Lodger* is the weakest of the three records, and the one least connected to Berlin. In a neat synthesis of these two critiques, it is sometimes claimed that the notion of the triptych was fabricated as a means of imparting some of the glow of the previous two records to the supposedly mediocre *Lodger*. In this essay, I will take issue with both of these arguments. I will claim that *Low*, "*Heroes*", and *Lodger* do form a coherent "Berlin Triptych" and that *Lodger* represents the logical, and indeed necessary, conclusion to this progression. At the heart of my argument is the concept and experience of migration, which is the focus of the special issue of this journal. In the mid-1970s David Bowie was living in Los Angeles at a highpoint of fame and acclaim. His life, however, was also an increasingly hellish nightmare of delusion, paranoia, and cocaine psychosis. In order to save his music, and his life, the singer decamped to Europe. For the next several years he lived an itinerant life with Berlin at its centre. The experience of displacement, and a series of encounters that this displacement facilitated (with the European new wave and a longer tradition of avant-garde modernism) led to both a reshuffling of the self and a radical new sound. The "triptych" tells the story of this progression, both narratively and sonically. *Low* represents a break with the malignant narcissism of the Thin White Duke persona he had adopted during the making of *Station to Station*. It is a kind of inward turn in which Bowie drops the masks and grapples with his own shattered subjectivity. On "*Heroes*" he emerges from this cocoon and embraces the local, and with *Lodger* he leaves himself behind and moves out into the world. From confinement to mobility, solipsism to imagination and empathy, the Berlin Triptych is both a product and record of migration.

1. Trilogy or Triptych?

Low, "*Heroes*", and *Lodger* have been variously called a trilogy and a triptych. Popular discussions have tended to use these terms interchangeably, while there has been inconsistency in usage from the Bowie camp. Even before the release of *Lodger*, Carlos Alomar, Bowie's guitar player and bandleader, noted that many people "[felt] that they were due for a trilogy" (Seabrook 2008, p. 441). But Bowie himself, and Brian Eno, referred to the albums as a triptych, a fact reiterated by Bowie's long-time producer Tony Visconti in recent interviews. In an onstage discussion at the Brooklyn Museum in 2018, Visconti noted that "Brian and David talked about making a triptych—and that was a great idea" (Producing David Bowie's Landmark Berlin Trilogy 2018).

There has been some skepticism in the critical community about the applicability of either term to *Low*, "*Heroes*", and *Lodger.* Some have doubted that there is enough coherence and continuity between the three records to see them as a greater whole, with *Lodger* in particular as an aberrant bit, impossible to synthesize. Thomas Seabrook is a good representative of this perspective. "[T]he notion that these records are all of a piece", he writes, "is rather misleading". For Seabrook, the records are not held together by either location or aesthetic. He takes issue with the "Berlin" designation, first of all. He points out that "the majority of the *Low* sessions took place at the Château d'Hérouville" outside Paris. "*Heroes*" was both recorded and significantly informed by Bowie's experiences in Berlin, but "*Lodger*'s ties to Berlin are much more dubious". Further, for Seabrook, these contradictions are not resolved on the aesthetic level. For "while *Low* and *Heroes* are indisputably derived from similar experiments in sound and mood, *Lodger*—part three, as it were, is a very different animal, for all sorts of reasons" (Seabrook 2008, pp. 428–29).

While these criticisms have some merit where a trilogy is concerned, a triptych is a different kind of medium that obeys different rules and conventions. The narrative and stylistic discontinuities that the above critiques focus on are not at all unusual for the triptych form. While I do not want to overburden this word, the fact is that Bowie consistently referred to these records as a triptych. The singer was very knowledgeable about visual art—he viewed art in museums, read about art and artists, collected art, and painted himself. If he insisted on the term, there is possibly a good reason for it that might reveal something important about the records and the connections between them. To dismiss it as marketing or mere pretension shuts down a potentially fruitful line of interpretation. In what follows, I will take this term seriously and see what emerges if we take *Low*, "*Heroes*", and *Lodger* to be a genuine triptych. After considering the unique character of the triptych in art history, I will imitate the analytical methodology of the medieval art historian and look at the outer wings of the Berlin Triptych (in my case the enveloping context in which the records were produced) and then the three panels in turn.

The triptych is a form mostly closely associated with the religious art of the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. However, interestingly, it was also used by a number of artists associated with German Expressionism broadly, and the Brücke group in particular. Max Beckmann, Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, and Max Pechstein all returned to the triptych form in the early part of the twentieth century. Did Bowie know of these works? I have been unable to come to any definitive conclusion on this issue. However, given the singer's obsessive interest in this movement, particularly during his time in Berlin when he would regularly visit the Brücke Museum, it is at least possible. The triptych is most relevant as an approach to the "Berlin" albums for the perspective it provides on the issues of narrative coherence and continuity. Arguably, the triptych provides a very different model than the trilogy. "Trilogy" tends to refer to three works that together form a larger whole and tell a coherent story. There is typically continuity in characters and setting. So, for example, the original *Star Wars* trilogy tells the story of Luke Skywalker as he goes from callow farm boy to experienced Jedi knight and helps the Rebel forces defeat the sinister Empire. In spite of their manifold differences, we might give similar-sounding synopses for *The Lord of the Rings* or Robertson Davies's *Deptford Trilogy.* While more experimental "trilogies" exist, which connect via theme (Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Three Colours* trilogy) or

technique (William Burroughs's *Nova Trilogy*), these tend to be the exception rather than the norm.

The triptych, on the other hand, often manifests a more complex relationship between the three individual parts of the greater work. While early triptychs typically represented a single scene or moment in time divided into three panels, rendering them essentially static, by the time of Rogier van der Weyden (1400–1464) and especially Hieronymus Bosch (1450–1516), new conventions had been developed that introduced narrative movement into the form. In the works of these artists, the triptych did not necessarily present one moment, fractured, but instead presented three different scenes that told a story. The panels might be roughly sequential and tell a basic story. For example, van der Weyden's *Miraflores* Altarpice (1442–1445) presents three moments from the New Testament—Virgin birth, Crucifixion, and Resurrection—presenting the viewer with a compressed life of Christ. But the compositions might be more complex. The work of Hieronymous Bosch is a case in point. Works such as *The Last Judgement* or *The Haywain Triptych* present narratives with shifting perspectives and ambiguous temporalities and causalities. In van der Weyden's work, time moves forward as our gaze moves from left to right. In the left-hand panel Christ is a baby, in the central panel he has just been taken down from the cross, and in the right-hand panel he has risen from the dead. Each panel is a sliver of space and time with Christ as its central figure and protagonist. The Bosch works, by contrast, lack this transparency and legibility. *The Haywain Triptych* might be said to tell a story. The left-hand panel presents the Garden of Eden; the central panel shows the sinful behavior of a multitude of fools in contemporary Europe; and the right-hand panel shows the torments of Hell. But what is that story? There is no single protagonist or location to ground the action. There is undoubtedly progression and narrative here, but of a more ambiguous kind. The triptych might be said to move from paradise to the temporal world to the inferno. Or from past to present to future, or both. One can think of other ways to frame this progression. Further, there is considerable narrative movement within each of the panels. The left-hand wing, for example, shows the Angels being expelled from Heaven; God creating Eve from Adam's rib; Adam and Eve with the Serpent at the Tree of Knowledge; the angel expelling Adam and Eve from the Garden. There is a dizzying shift of perspective between, but also within, the panels.

There is much more that could be said. But for our purposes this is enough to demonstrate that at least from the time of Bosch, the triptych was established as a storytelling medium that allowed for complex narratives with radical shifts in perspective and focus and ambiguous connections between the various panels. These are not random scenes, but they require considerable input from the viewer to create coherence and continuity. Returning now to Seabrook's objections to naming the "Berlin" records a triptych, we can see that they do not really hold up. The fact that the three records were not made in Berlin, or are even rooted narratively in Berlin, is neither here nor there. Nor is the stylistic heterogeneity of the albums. Like Bosch's works, Bowie's records are no less a triptych because they combine different settings and styles. The fundamental question is, do these records present a coherent narrative in spite of this heterogeneity? In what follows, I will argue that they do. From chaos and trauma, the albums chart a restorative journey—first, deep into the recesses of the self, and then back out again, locally and then globally. Berlin stands at the heart of this process—it is the setting of the central panel of the triptych, and all movement flows into and then out of it.

2. The Outer Wings—Los Angeles and *Station to Station*

By the mid-1970s, David Bowie was one of the most popular musicians in the world. Starting with 1969's "Space Oddity", he put out a string of increasingly successful and critically lauded albums, culminating in the epochal *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars*, an album that was ultimately certified platinum in the UK. Several more glam rock albums and a swerve into Philly soul (what Bowie referred to as "plastic soul") cemented his popularity in the States, leading to a massive theatrical tour and

appearances on high-profile television programs like *The Dick Cavett Show*. However, in spite of his notoriety and success, or perhaps because of them, not all was right with Bowie. His media appearances in 1974 and 1975 reveal a man in a state of deteriorating mental and physical health. His behaviour was increasingly odd, and he had become shockingly thin, almost cadaverous. Reflecting on his image on the cover of his album *Bowie Live*, the singer would later note that "it looks as if I've just stepped out of the grave" (Seabrook 2008, p. 12).

Bowie relocated to Los Angeles in 1975, in part in order to pursue a career in Hollywood that his starring role in Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* seemed to open up.[2] It was a very poor match. Bowie's tendency to extremism was exacerbated by LA's culture of excess in ways that would lead the singer into some very dark places. His cocaine and amphetamine use soon reached astronomical levels and he was subsisting on very little more than red peppers, milk, and Gitanes. He became obsessed with both fascism and the occult. Endless stories of the singer's bizarre and troubling behavior at this time have circulated since the 1970s: Bowie storing his urine in a fridge so it wouldn't be stolen by witches; seeing bodies fall past his window; being terrified by Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page, who he was convinced was a warlock who was trying to kill him. Many have seen his behavior at this time as a manifestation of "cocaine psychosis"—a condition brought on by chronic stimulant use that mimics acute paranoid schizophrenia and manifests itself in symptoms such as agitation, paranoia, hallucinations, and delusions.

Somehow, incredibly, in the middle of all this, Bowie managed to record *Station to Station* which Brian Eno has called "one of the great records of all time" (Wilcken 2005, p. 15). The singer has notoriously claimed that he has no memory of these recording sessions and only knows that the record was made in Los Angeles because he subsequently read about it. Bowie's work on this record also led to the emergence of a new persona—the Thin White Duke. Bowie had always been more than a singer or even a musician. His initial ambition was to be a light entertainer in the vaudeville or music hall tradition. Even when he made the leap to rock and glam, he brought this performative sensibility with him. His shows were often intensely theatrical with elaborate sets, costumes, and makeup, and arguably the songs themselves continued this approach. As far as songs such as "Space Oddity" are from early Bowie songs such as "Uncle Arthur" or "We are Hungry Men", with their focus on narrative, character, and outlandish scenarios, we may be able to detect the continued traces of the novelty song tradition in Bowie's mature work. Further, Bowie did not only sing about unusual and broadly drawn characters such as Aladdin Sane or Halloween Jack, he also embodied them and acted them out. This was more than simple onstage performance. It could cross the line into something resembling method acting or even a loss of a stable sense of self as Bowie was taken over by these characters.[3] The most exaggerated case of this was Bowie's extended turn as Ziggy Stardust in 1972–1973. The titular character of Bowie's breakthrough album, *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, Ziggy is an androgynous, bisexual, alien rockstar who comes to Earth to warn of an impending apocalypse. While the album made Bowie a star, his total immersion in the character exacted a significant psychological toll. In a famous interview with *Melody Maker* in 1977 Bowie claimed that:

> that fucker would not leave me alone for years. That was when it all started to sour. And it soured so quickly you wouldn't believe it. And it took me an awful time to level out. My whole personality was affected. Again I brought that upon myself.
>
> I can't say I'm sorry when I look back, because it provoked such an extraordinary set of circumstances in my life. I thought I might as well take Ziggy to interviews as well. Why leave him on stage? Looking back it was completely absurd.
>
> It became very dangerous. I really did have doubts about my sanity. I can't deny that the experience affected me in a very exaggerated and marked manner. I

> think I put myself very dangerously near the line. Not in physical sense but definitively in mental sense. (Jones 1977)

It is unclear whether overinvestment in a character led to ego fragility, ego fragility led to an overinvestment in a character, or whether there was a feedback loop between these two issues, but Ziggy established a kind of precedent in which characters mirrored or accompanied troubled psychological states for Bowie.

The Thin White Duke came out of Bowie's very troubled state of mind in LA and manifested the singer's twin obsessions with fascism and the occult. His arrival is announced on the first line of "Station to Station", the first track on the eponymously titled album. "The return of the Thin White Duke", croons Bowie, "Throwing darts in lovers' eyes". The second line has been interpreted as a reference to both Prospero, the exiled magician of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and the occultist Aleister Crowley, for whom the dart is an overdetermined symbol (in addition to the literary use of this symbol, Crowley's followers killed a young couple by throwing darts at them in 1918). The first half of the song presents the Thin White Duke, "Lost in [his] circle", "Tall in this room overlooking the ocean", "Bending sound, dredging the ocean", while he meditates on the Stations of the Cross, the Kabbalah, Shakespeare and Crowley's book, *White Stains.* The lyrics are esoteric, not only in the sense of devoting themselves to a tradition of occult magic, but also in the more quotidian sense of being dense, ambiguous, indeterminate. We are a long way from the narrative clarity of "Space Oddity". At the risk of doing violence to these literary and allusive lines, might we see an element of disguised autobiography in the song? Might this (at least in part) represent Bowie—detached and isolated, lost in the labyrinths of occult system building, and, in spite of his frailty and confusion, filled with fantasies of potency and power ("Bending sound, dredging the ocean")? Halfway through the song the speaker protests that "It's not the side-effects of the cocaine", but it seems like a case of protesting too much.

In interviews and performances at this time Bowie began sporting a radically different look (see Figure 1). Gone was the makeup and the glam sequins and boas. He dressed, instead, in a crisp white shirt, black pants, and a waistcoat. His hair, a spiked red mullet in the Ziggy days, was now short and slicked back. There is an elegance to this look, but also a severity and coldness. Bowie emphasized these qualities in subsequent discussions of this character. The Thin White Duke was, "a very Aryan, fascist type; a would-be romantic with absolutely no emotion at all but who spouted a lot of neo-romance" (Oppenheim 2016). Later Bowie would see this figure even more starkly as "a nasty character indeed", and finally simply as "an ogre" (Wilcken 2005, p. 43). But at the time he seems not to have had this objectivity and perspective and the line between the monstrous Thin White Duke and the singer himself was porous and problematical.

These confusions came to a head during the subsequent *Station to Station* tour. On the way to Moscow, Bowie had his luggage searched at the border town of Brest, and customs officials found books about Joseph Goebbels and by Albert Speer. Bowie subsequently claimed that this was research material for a film on Goebbels that he was planning, although no film ever materialized. Regardless, controversies over Bowie's relationship to Nazism would continue to dog the singer. After his performance in Stockholm on April 26, Bowie responded to questions about his political leanings by opining: "As I see it, I am the only alternative for the premier of England. I believe Britain could benefit from a fascist leader. After all, fascism is really nationalism" (Wilcken 2005, p. 85). Bowie would quickly backpedal from these statements, but by that time was mired in an even greater scandal. On May 2 he returned to England for the first time in two years. This was conceived as a victorious homecoming and Bowie was meant to address a large gathering of fans at Victoria Station. Due to technical problems the address never happened, and Bowie only waved to fans for a few minutes from his open-topped car before departing. In the days following the event, photos circulated in the tabloids of Bowie standing in his car, giving what looked to be a stiff-armed Nazi salute (see https://timeline.com/the-cocaine-fueled-fascist-who-almost-destroyed-david-bowie-46bf936e3035, accessed on 8 October 2021).

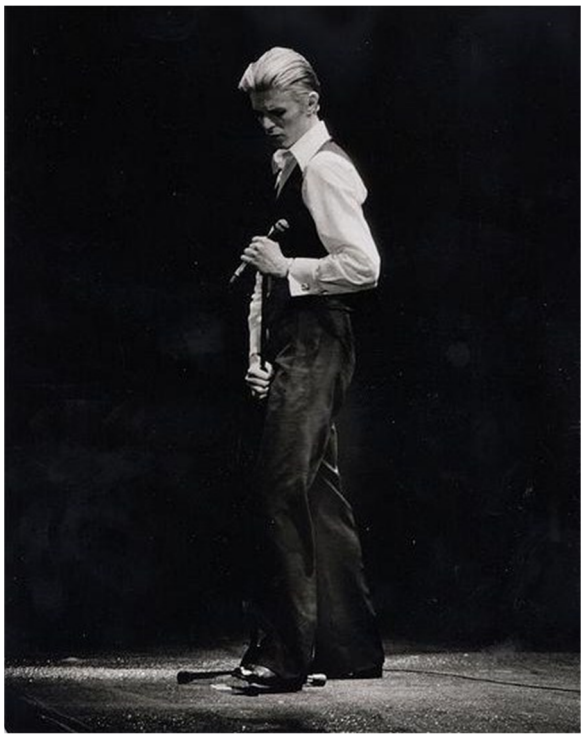


Figure 1. Bowie as the Thin White Duke at the O'Keefe Centre, Toronto, Ontario Canada on 28 February 1976. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en, accessed on 8 October 2021). Attribution: Jean-Luc Ourlin. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Thin_White_Duke_76.jpg, accessed on 8 October 2021. Reprinted with permission from JeanLuc Ourlin, copyright 2021.

Bowie vehemently denied that this is what he was doing and claimed that he had been caught in mid-wave by the photographer. When his previous, seemingly admiring, statements about the Nazis were brought up, he argued that this was nothing but theatre and provocation.

It is hard to know what to make of this series of missteps. While it is perfectly conceivable that the Victoria station controversy was a function of photographic manipulation, the statements are not so easy to dismiss. While there was undeniably an element of provocation in Bowie's choice to glamorize the world's greatest taboo, the singer was also genuinely fascinated by fascism at this time. But it was a naive and idiosyncratic vision of fascism that bracketed war and genocide and focused instead on occult themes such as the supposed pursuit of the Holy Grail by the Nazis. I think that ultimately this says less about Bowie's ideological commitments than it does about his state of mind. These episodes reveal a man increasingly living in a world disconnected from reality and defined by fantasy—understood both as childish fantasies of witches and Nazi relic hunters and the fantasy projections of the self that Bowie inhabited and found increasingly difficult to separate himself from. While this sorry state of affairs should certainly be connected to the delusions of cocaine psychosis, it was also exacerbated by Los Angeles and its culture of fantasy, illusion, and excess in which the involution and grandiosity of stars was not only accepted but actively encouraged.

Bowie himself began to feel that life in LA was disastrous for his mental and physical health. Later, in his more charitable moments he noted that the city was "the least suitable place on earth for a person to go in search of identity and stability" (Wilcken 2005, p. 23). Less charitably, he referred to it as "the most vile piss-pot in the world" and noted that the city could be seen as "a movie that is so corrupt with a script that it is so devious and insidious. It's the scariest movie ever written" (Jones 1977). It became increasingly clear to Bowie that he needed to leave. But intimations of escape are already present on *Station*

to Station—Bowie's quintessentially LA album. The title track begins with the noise of an approaching locomotive (which Bowie found on an old sound effects record and subjected to extensive phasing and EQ) sounding the themes of travel and mobility. Connections have sometimes been made between the train, the title *Station to Station*, and Kraftwerk's *Trans Europe Express.* Strictly speaking, this is not correct—the Kraftwerk record came out a year later. However, the German band does seem to cast a shadow over the track.[4] After an extended introduction the song finally locks onto a groove that can be seen as Bowie's riff on the motorik beat of "Krautrock" bands like Kraftwerk, Can, or Neu. This association is picked up by the lyrics in the second half of the song. After disavowing the influence of cocaine, Bowie sings plaintively, "It's too late to be grateful/It's too late to be late again/It's too late to be hateful/The European canon is here/near". This might speak to the excitement Bowie felt about the experiments going on in European music at this time, particularly in Germany. Later, after the release of *Low*, the first album in Bowie's "Berlin triptych", he spoke to the music press about the crucial influence of new European music. "You know, I have been into all of that for a while", he told the *NME*. "It's influenced by the new wave—not the American new wave bands, the European new wave" (Seabrook 2008, pp. 166–67). Or, perhaps, this line refers to a broader European canon. Bowie had long been deeply engaged by European modernism. The stage design for the *Diamond Dogs* tour was influenced by Expressionism, the sets of Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* in particular. On the *Station to Station* tour, in lieu of an opening act, Bowie screened the classic Surrealist film by Dalí and Buñuel, *Un Chien Andalou*, backed by the songs of Kraftwerk's *Radio-Activity* album.[5] Indeed, Kraftwerk sits perfectly in between these two different conceptions of the "European canon"—they were a key part of the new canon emerging in popular music that was pushing it into more avant-garde and experimental areas. The band itself was influenced by modernism—drawing on movements like Constructivism and the Bauhaus for its visual iconography and exploring a nostalgic retro-futurism focused on railroads, bicycles, and motor cars. However precisely one chooses to parse these lines, they seem to speak to the lure of Europe and Bowie's desire to relocate there. This is precisely how Bowie himself came to see this album. "[I]t was like a plea to come back to Europe", he noted in an interview with *Melody Maker*. "It was one of those self chat things one has with oneself from time to time" (Jones 1977).

This return was already being planned by Bowie's management team. With a huge tax bill looming, a plan was hatched to relocate the singer to Switzerland, a nation with a much lower tax rate. While he would move to the small town of Blonay and maintain this as his official residence until the mid-1980s, he would ultimately spend little time at this home. From the very beginning he had something more dynamic in mind. A decisive encounter regarding his living situation happened on February 11th, after his sold-out show at the Inglewood Forum. Here, the visual artist David Hockney introduced Bowie to Christopher Isherwood—the expatriate English novelist best known for his portraits of decadent, interwar Berlin, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin* (the work that inspired the Broadway musical and Oscar-winning film, *Cabaret*). Apparently, the two men spoke at some length that night. Bowie was soon on his way back to Europe, and within a year, in spite of his official Swiss residency, was living in Berlin.

3. The Left-Hand Wing: *Low*

However, there was a crucial waystation on his path to the German city. In the summer of 1976, Bowie spent time at the Château d'Hérouville, outside Paris. He had recorded *Pinups* there in 1973 and returned in 1976 with his old friend, ex-Stooges frontman Iggy Pop. Although recognized by the late 1970s as a "Godfather" of punk rock, Pop was increasingly overshadowed by a younger generation of punks and his career was in decline. Attempting to kick his cocaine addiction, Bowie was not yet ready for an album of his own. However, he was enthusiastic about producing and co-writing a kind of comeback album with Pop. Many critics have seen this album—*The Idiot*—as a warm-up for Bowie's own work of the late 1970s. Indeed, Bowie himself admitted that he was to an extent using Iggy as a

"guinea pig for what I wanted to do with sound" (Seabrook 2008, p. 143).[6] With its use of synthesizers and drum machines, and songs that ranged from funk and disco-inspired grooves to bleak industrial soundscapes, *The Idiot* represented a move far beyond the more limited sonic palette and song structures of punk. The album did indeed rejuvenate Iggy's career as well as launching Bowie into one of the most experimental phases of his musical life.

With the recording completed at the Château, Bowie and Pop would move (by way of Giorgio Moroder's Musicland Studio in Munich) to Hansa Studios in Berlin where they would mix the album. Bowie would repeat this path several months later with his own album, *Low*. Initial recording was done at the Château, and the recording was finished and the mixing done at Hansa in Berlin, where Bowie (and Iggy) had by this point permanently relocated. The two musicians threw themselves into their expatriate life in Germany. They rented an apartment over an auto-parts store in the Schönberg district, not a ten-minute walk from where Isherwood had lived. This was a poor neighborhood, and one populated mainly by Turkish immigrants, a situation that would impact Bowie in a variety of ways, as we shall see. From this base they would explore the city, spending their time in bars (especially the Cafe Exil, which they looked at as an extension of their living quarters), cabarets, and galleries. The Brücke Museum was one of Bowie's favorites, and he would come here often to look at Expressionist works by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde, and Erich Heckel. He had long been fascinated by this movement.[7] "Since my teenage years", he noted, "I had obsessed on the angst-ridden, emotional work of the expressionists and Berlin had been their spiritual home" (Seabrook 2008, p. 74).

These works were evidently very much on Bowie's mind at this time. For the cover of *The Idiot*, he had Iggy recreate the image *Roquairol* by Erich Heckel, while on *"Heroes"* Bowie would return to this painting and strike the pose himself (see https://norselandsrock.com/david-bowie-iggy-pop-erich-heckel/, accessed on 8 October 2021).

I think we may be able to see *Low* as something like an Expressionist album—a kind of modernist "inward turn". This term was coined by the literary critic Erich Kahler in order to designate the increased interest in consciousness displayed by the "modern" novel up to the eighteenth century (Kahler 2017). Perhaps signalled by Kahler himself, who chooses as an epigraph to his book a poem by Rilke that refers to Weltinnenraum, Inner Space, the term has been adopted by scholars interested in the even more audacious experiments of writers, artists, and musicians (like the Expressionists) at the fin de siècle and early twentieth century. Whereas in the past, as we have seen, Bowie would inhabit characters and compose various narrative songs about and through them, *Low* explored a different paradigm. Gone was the Thin White Duke and no other character arose to take his place. Instead, we seem to get Bowie himself, diving deep into his psyche and grappling, both lyrically and sonically, with his experiences in Los Angeles and Europe.[8] Side One of the album is the more conventional of the two sides and contains something approaching recognizable pop songs. These are very stripped down and deal in a raw and unmediated way with Bowie's experiences. Many of them seem to be set at Doheny Drive in Los Angeles or locations that function as surrogates for this setting. Bowie or his avatars are presented as isolated and disconnected. For example, in "Sound and Vision" he sings:

> Blue, blue, electric blue
> That's the colour of my room
> Where I will live
> Blue, blue
> Pale blinds drawn all day
> Nothing to do, nothing to say

"Breaking Glass" takes us even further into Bowie's strange vampiric existence in LA. He sings:

> Baby, I've been
> Breaking glass in your room again

Listen
Don't look at the carpet
I drew something awful on it

What is this "something awful"? Conceivably this is some occult symbol. Bowie had taken to drawing these on the walls at Doheny Drive to ward off black magic. Interestingly, there are promotional photos of Bowie from this time that show him drawing the Kabbalistic Tree of Life on the ground, which resonate powerfully with these lines (see https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2016/04/Capturing-David-Bowie/478371/, accessed on 8 October 2021).

In "Breaking Glass" the speaker continues by saying, "You're such a wonderful person/But you got problems". He is putatively speaking to and of someone else, but this seems like projection. Bowie is actually referring to dissociated fragments of the self. This strategy can be found on other songs on Side One as well. "I'm just a little bit afraid of you/'Cause love won't make you cry" he sings in "What in the World", capturing, economically, both his affectlessness and the concern it was generating. This fragmentation manifests itself musically as well as lyrically. The songs on Side One are barely songs at all. They don't follow the verse-chorus-bridge structure expected of pop songs. They often fade in, in medias res, and fade out without adequate development. They are like the broken bits of pop songs; the shards of a mirror dashed to the ground ("Baby, I've been/Breaking glass in your room again").

As the side progresses, the recurrence of these fragmented structures begins to feel like the workings of a repetition compulsion. Indeed, repetition is another key trope of the record. This is most explicitly thematized in "Always Crashing in the Same Car". Like the other songs on the album, this has autobiographical roots. In his early days in Berlin, still in the throes of drug addiction, Bowie and Iggy saw their drug dealer while cruising around town in Bowie's Mercedes. Convinced that he had ripped them off, Bowie smashed the drug dealer's car over and over again, and then, horrified by what he had done, proceeded to flee and drive around and around the underground garage of their hotel at high speed, screaming that he wanted to end it all until the car ran out of gas and they rolled to a stop. Some of these events are presented literally in the song. For example, the speaker notes that:

I saw you peeping
As I pushed my foot down to the floor
I was going round and round the hotel garage
Must have been touching close to 94

But the event takes on greater metaphorical significance as well. It becomes an image of traumatic repetition, of the inability to break out of the loops of destructive behavior and to free oneself of the hold of the death drive.[9]

Stasis, repetition, and fragmentation recur on the more experimental second side of the record. Written in collaboration with Brian Eno (or in the case of "Warszawa", entirely by Eno), this side bears the influence of Eno's ambient music as well as the minimalist works of composers such as Philip Glass and Steve Reich. Bowie noted that the second side of the album was about things "I couldn't express in words. Rather, it required textures, and of all the people I've heard write textures, Brian's always appealed to me the most" (Seabrook 2008, p. 225). At first glance, these important things seem to be the social and political realities of Central and Eastern Europe that Bowie had witnessed on his travels. This is named most explicitly on "Warszawa", a city the singer had seen on a brief layover between trains. The other three tracks on the second side of the album—"Art Decade", "Weeping Wall", and "Subterraneans"—refer to life in Berlin. "Art Decade" might be seen as an attempt to capture the faded and decaying quality of cultural life in the German city. As Bowie described it in 1977, Berlin was "a city cut off from its world, art, and culture, dying with no hope of retribution" (Seabrook 2008, p. 110). "Weeping Wall" references and is meant to evoke the miseries of the Berlin Wall, while "Subterraneans" is putatively an

ode to the forgotten of East Berlin, who are evoked by Bowie's mournful sax lines which are meant to call to mind the jazz and cabaret scenes of Isherwood's time, now irretrievably a relic of the past.

The pieces tend to fade in and out inconclusively. There is little dynamic development throughout. Instead of conforming to a standard time signature and obeying the conventions of two, four, or eight bar phrasing, Eno would lay down a track with 430 metronome clicks that provided a general space and pulse within which to work. They would change chords and sections at randomly determined click numbers. Sometimes, the changes would be even more subtle than that—alterations in texture could be made by simply opening and closing the filters on the various synthesizers that provided the bulk of the sounds on the pieces.

While these static and fragmented soundscapes might be seen as musical representations of the inertia and ruination of postwar Berlin and the Soviet bloc, given the continuity of musical tropes between Sides One and Two of the record, I am inclined to see these compositions as further reflections of the traumatized sensibility depicted on the pop songs of the album. If Side Two presents us with a series of landscapes, these are Expressionist landscapes where the external world is actually a projection of the inner realm. These songs tell us less about Warsaw and Berlin than they do about Bowie's feelings in Warsaw and Berlin, or perhaps just use these cities as props to access the feelings.

If this sounds, depressingly, like incarceration in the prison house of a traumatized sensibility, the album also presents fleeting moments of hope. While dramatizing this incarceration in "Sound and Vision", the speaker also notes that he will "sit right down/Waiting for the gift of sound and vision". Writing and music are a gift that will allow the speaker—will allow Bowie—to move past the endless round of traumatized acting out towards something like a working through. The mediation of art will allow him to move from the self to the real beyond.

4. The Central Panel: *"Heroes"*

"*Heroes*" is the moment at which he breaks free. In triptychs, it is not at all unusual to have a central panel that is larger than either of the two wings. This panel serves as the focal point of the triptych. It is not necessarily the conclusion of the narrative but might be a crucial turning point or a focus for veneration. In the Berlin Triptych, "*Heroes*" serves this function. It is the album at the centre of the triptych, metaphorically as well as literally—the record that the rest of the music both flows into and out of. The album was composed and recorded completely in Berlin. Bowie had been living in the city for almost a year. He was off cocaine and was healthier and happier than he had been in a long time. If *Low* was a kind of Expressionist reckoning with the singer's traumatized subjectivity, "*Heroes*" represents a decisive step out of the prison house of his own interiority.

Thomas Seabrook reads the opening track, "Beauty and the Beast" as Bowie turning the page of the Thin White Duke era. One can see the "beauty and the beast" as a metaphor for drugs—for the seductive highs and monstrous lows that they engender. When Bowie sings, "Nothing will corrupt us/Nothing will compete/Thank God Heaven left us/Standing on our feet", one can easily see this as an expression of gratitude that the singer had survived the dark days on Doheny Drive. There is an energy and an edge to the song that was largely missing from *Low.* The record as a whole feels manically alive. Although atmospheric synths are still prominent, spiky guitars return to the foreground—both Carlos Alomar's funky rhythm and Robert Fripp's wild leads, often cobbled together from various takes and processed almost beyond recognition by Brian Eno's EMS Synthi synthesizer.

Fripp's guitar playing is a focus of the album's second track, "Joe the Lion", a song dedicated to art. Where *Low* presented Bowie locked away in his room, waiting for the gift of sound and vision, "*Heroes*" sees him actively looking out and drawing inspiration from real artists. The song is a paean to the performance artist Chris Burden. Famous (or infamous) for pieces such as 1974's *Trans-fixed* in which Burden was nailed to the hood of a Volkswagen, or *Shoot*, in which he was shot in the arm by an assistant. Bowie refers to both

of these pieces in the song. Burden is presented as a heroic figure—"Joe the Lion/Made of iron"—a figure of power and endurance. "Art doesn't have a purpose", Burden argued. "It's a free spot in society, where you can do anything" (O'Leary 2011). This statement could serve as an epigraph to "Joe the Lion", a song in which the freedom and intensity of art is contrasted to a state of waking death—"You get up and sleep"—that might be a function of drug-induced catatonia, post-war conformism, or both. In a moment of bravura vocal performance, Bowie takes the side of freedom and escape, counselling the listener to "slither down the greasy pipe" and "hobble over any freeway" so that you may "be like your dreams tonight".

Although there are a number of larger-than-life figures, like Burden, who are referenced on the album, the record's sense of heroism is much more modest. So modest, in fact, that Bowie felt compelled to put the term Heroes in quotation marks. The songs tend to focus on small acts of defiance or self-assertion. In an interview with *Melody Maker*, shortly after the release of the song, Bowie noted that "the only heroic act" is to "get on with life from the very simple pleasure of remaining alive, despite every attempt being made to kill you" (Jones 1977)—an understandable perspective from someone who had just walked through the valley of the shadow of death.

This modesty is evident on the album's title track. Although it has become an anthem played at sporting events and the turning points of films, the song is actually quite restrained in its sense of what contemporary heroism entails. The song came out of three sources of inspiration. The first was the story, "A Grave For a Dolphin" by the Italian writer, Alberto Denti di Pirajno that detailed the doomed love affair between an Italian soldier and an Eritrean nurse during World War Two. The other two sources were rooted in Berlin. One was another work of art—the painting *Lovers Between Garden Walls* by the Expressionist Otto Mueller that Bowie had seen at the Brücke Museum (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Otto Mueller, *Lovers Between Garden Walls*, 1916. Glue, paint on burlap. Brücke-Museum, public domain. Used in conjuntion with Creative Commons License CC-BY-SA 4.0. Reprinted with permission from Brücke-Museum, copyright 2021.

The second came out of personal experience. Legend has it that one day Bowie looked out of the window at Hansa Tonstudio 2, where they were recording the album, to see a couple come together and share an embrace under the looming shadow of the Berlin Wall.

The two figures were Tony Visconti, Bowie's producer, and Antonia Maass, a jazz singer who had been doing backing vocals on "*Heroes*". The relationship was illicit—Visconti was married at the time—and so the scene resonated with the theme of doomed romance that had attracted Bowie to the other works. Bowie imaginatively elaborates on these three sources in the epic third verse where he sings:

> I, I can remember (I remember)
> Standing by the wall (By the wall)
> And the guns shot above our heads (Over our heads)
> And we kissed as though nothing could fall (Nothing could fall)

Overall, the lyrics of the song are ambiguous and allow the listener to interpret them in a variety of different ways. We can take them straight—as the romantic account of a doomed relationship against the backdrop of the Cold War. However, it is equally possible to see the epic kiss as the fantasy of a middle-aged couple slipping into the torpor and contempt of familiarity and routine. This seems to be situation that Bowie sketches out when he sings:

> And you, you can be mean
> And I, I'll drink all the time
> 'Cause we're lovers, and that is a fact
> Yes, we're lovers, and that is that

More allegorically, it is also possible to see the song as the story of lovers ignored or derided by mainstream society—interracial or non-hetero lovers—who might beat back shame and opposition in order to "be us just for one day". We do not need to choose between these various interpretations. Indeed, one of the marks of the brilliance of the song is our capacity to understand it in many different ways. But two important things tie together all of these different readings. In all of them, the song is about small people who try to assert themselves, however fleetingly, in the face of obstacles and forces much greater than they are, and the feeling that the song conveys and generates in listeners is empathy. We are a long way now from the grandiosity and narcissism of the Thin White Duke or even from the inwardness of *Low*. Bowie has stepped out of himself and is filled with compassion for the suffering of the Other. Berlin is both the focus and fount of this newfound compassion. In the *Melody Maker* interview quoted above, Bowie describes some of his key impressions of his new home. Berlin, notes Bowie:

> "is a city made up of bars for sad disillusioned people to get drunk in. One never knows how long it is going to remain there. One fancies that it is going very fast.
>
> "That's one of the reasons, sure, why I was attracted to the city. It's a feeling that I really tried to capture in the paintings, while I was there, of the Turks that live in the city. There's a track on the album called Neukölln, and that's the area of Berlin where the Turks are shackled in bad conditions.
>
> "They're very much an isolated community. It's very sad. Very very sad. And that kind of reality obviously contributed to the mood on both Low and "Heroes".
>
> "I mean, having encountered an experience like that it's hard to sing "Let's all think of peace and love . . . "No, . . . David, why did you say that? That is a stupid remark. Because that's exactly where you should arrive after seeing something like that. You arrive at a sense of compassion. The title track of "Heroes" is about facing that kind of reality and standing up to it. (Jones 1977)

By contrast, the Nietzschean characters that Bowie had once celebrated on songs such as "Station to Station", "The Supermen", or "Quicksand", he now presents as pitiful figures, scheming impotently in backrooms. We see this in "Sons of the Silent Age". Here, the titular Sons "Stand on platforms blank looks and notebooks", looking like some kind of minor party functionaries in a scene from Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will.* Later, the speaker tells us that the Sons:

Pace their rooms like a cell's dimension
Rise for a year or two then make war
Search through their one inch thoughts
Then decide it couldn't be done

No longer marvellous Prosperos, the self-styled masters of the universe are vacuous and imprisoned by their own delusions. Bowie now has nothing but contempt for their fantasies of potency and power.

Like *Low*, "*Heroes*" is divided between a side of more conventional pop songs and a side of ambient instrumentals. But whereas on *Low* the instrumentals were used to plunge into the ineffable depths of Bowie's fractured interiority, on "*Heroes*" they have a different character and function. These pieces tend to look outwards, often to the local environs of Berlin and Germany. Side Two starts with "V-2 Schneider". The title (which also serves as a repeated refrain) is an homage to Florian Schneider of Kraftwerk, another of Bowie's artistic "heroes", whose pioneering electronic music exerts such a profound influence over the triptych. The homage to and influence of Kraftwerk can be further heard in the synthesized airplane sounds and Bowie's vocoder-like vocals. In opposition to the impotent political Sons of the Silent Age, Schneider, like Chris Burden, is represented as a figure of power. An artist of vision and authenticity, he is like a V-2 rocket.

As mentioned in the quote from Bowie above, "Neukölln" is a kind of sonic portrait of Berlin's impoverished Turkish Gastarbeiter community. The dark, nightmarish sound, with distorted guitar, chirping synths and Bowie's mournful sax would have been at home on Side Two of *Low.* But there is an interesting, and crucial difference. While the tone poems of *Low* seem to be about the outside world, they are in reality projections of the singer's interior. "Warszawa" is a fascinating example. Putatively a portrait of the Polish city, the song ends with what sounds like a choir singing in a Slavic tongue, but it is nothing of the kind. It is Bowie, whose vocals have been processed so that sometimes he sings in his normal register and at other times he sounds like a choirboy. Bowie's performance was inspired by a recording of a Bulgarian boys' choir that he had. He is vaguely imitating the sound of the syllables to give them an Eastern European flavour. Therefore, what initially appears as a portrait of the Other is nothing but the pure Self—a sonic portrait of Bowie's own Weltinnenraum, narrated in a private language. "Neukölln" goes in the opposite direction. For this portrait of Turkish migrants, he uses a Middle Eastern modal scale for his saxophone runs. Instead of the Self imposing itself on the Other, colonizing it, the Self opens up in its encounter with the Other. We can see an even more extensive example of this in the instrumental track "Moss Garden". A "very descriptive" song about the Moss Garden in Kyoto Japan, the track even features Bowie playing a Japanese koto. In 2001, Bowie noted that "there will usually be one track on any given album of mine which will be a fair indicator of the intent of the following album" (Wilcken 2005, p. 15). On "*Heroes*" that function is fulfilled by "Neukölln" and "Moss Garden" whose globetrotting exploration of musical sounds and experiences would pave the way for *Lodger*.[10]

5. Right-Hand Wing: *Lodger*

As Bowie said of himself in 1977, "I don't live anywhere, really. I travel 100% of the time" (O'Leary 2019, p. 113). In addition to living as an expatriate in Berlin, Bowie had been touring extensively, and had also vacationed in Kenya and Japan, and these experiences had an impact on the new record, both thematically and sonically. Although it is certainly not a concept album, themes of travel and displacement dominate *Lodger*. The entirety of the first side of the record—"Fantastic Voyage", "African Night Flight", "Move On", "Yassassin", "Red Sails"—is a deep dive into these themes. In certain cases, the songs draw explicitly on Bowie's experiences. "Yassassin", for example, returns to the subject matter of "Neukölln" and considers the marginalized Turkish community that Bowie had lived among in Berlin. The song dramatizes the struggles of a Gastarbeiter who leaves rural Turkey for economic opportunity in the German metropolis. What he finds, however, is rejection, violence—"You want to fight/But I don't want to leave"—and a life

of terror: "Don't say nothing's wrong/'Cause I've got a love/And she's afeared". "African Night Flight" focuses on a strange group of expatriate German bush pilots that Bowie encountered during his travels in Africa. In other cases, the travel is more fantastical. "Red Sails", with its nautical imagery and cries of "The hinterland, the hinterland/We're gonna sail to the hinterland" concerns "a contemporary English mercenary-cum-swashbuckling Errol Flynn . . . in the China Sea" (Buckley 1999, pp. 350–51). Even songs that at first glance do not seem to fit this mould on deeper consideration echo many of the same tropes and themes. "Look Back in Anger" from Side Two is about a visit from an angel, perhaps the angel of death. But in Bowie's hands, this being has none of the power and majesty of the heavenly host. With his cough and crumpled wings, the angel seems more like a bedraggled expatriate from another world—an angelic displaced person.[11]

Lyrically and conceptually, the songs on this record represent an interesting evolution for Bowie. There is a return to the deep-seated storytelling impulse of the earlier records. We have tales of angels, and swashbucklers, and shady bush pilots. But there is a difference. There is no central character that dominates the album, no Bowie alter ego that coopts all experiences. While Bowie inhabits these characters, he is not absorbed by them. He is like a mobile, transpersonal sensibility passing in and out the consciousnesses of others: a kind of psychic traveller. If there is something like a central character here, it is the "Lodger" of the title, but this is a "character" very different from Ziggy Stardust or Aladdin Sane. The Lodger might be looked at as a kind of ideal type or Platonic form of the migrant or displaced person, with each of the figures on the album—the Turkish Gastarbeiter, the alienated bush pilot—a kind of avatar of this central figure. Or (and these are not mutually exclusive takes), we might look at Bowie himself as the Lodger, momentarily taking up residence in the experience and sensibility of a series of deracinated Others.

This migratory sensibility is expressed on the album sonically as well. Two enduring critiques of the record are that it is neither as innovative nor as stylistically consistent as its two forebears.[12] However, I think these critiques are misplaced. The album is stylistically innovative. It just chooses to innovate in a different direction. Instead of continuing to probe electronica, ambient music, new wave, and post punk, Bowie turns here to what comes to be called world music. Anticipating similar turns in the music of Talking Heads, Peter Gabriel, Paul Simon and others in the early 1980s, Bowie expands his musical palette by incorporating elements of musical traditions from around the world. If the album lacks a single, consistent "sound" it is because it pairs the peregrinations of the Lodger with a kind of musical globetrotting. "Yassassin" combines funk elements with reggae rhythms and the Hijaz Kar Maqam (the scale or mode common in Turkish classical music). "Red Sails" dabbles in Krautrock. "African Night Flight" pairs John Cage-inspired "prepared piano" with African chanting and a manic spoken-word vocal delivery that seems to flirt with rap (was Bowie familiar with emerging hip hop culture? This song was recorded in New York at the same time that hip hop was emerging in the Bronx).[13] Further, it is important to emphasize that Bowie's borrowings make no claims to purity. Indeed, throughout, impurity is emphasized. Borders are crossed or broken down. Dissimilar or even dissonant musical traditions are yoked together to make unexpected hybrids. This is not the music of some ethnographic fantasyland, but an explicitly migratory aesthetic that synthesises, combines, and mashes up. Speaking of "Red Sails", Bowie noted that, "Here we took a new German music feel and put it against the idea of a contemporary English mercenary-cum-swashbuckling Errol Flynn, and put him in the China Sea. We have a lovely cross-reference of cultures" (Buckley 1999, pp. 350–51).

Other aspects of the writing and recording processes further extended these initiatives, although in ways that on the surface may be less apparent. Brian Eno returned as Bowie's collaborator and immediately began to impose his "art pranks" on the process. If Expressionism casts a long shadow over *Low,* the patron saints of *Lodger* are Dada and Surrealism. Bowie seems to slyly acknowledge this in "Red Sails" when towards the end of the song he sings "And it's far far, far far far, far far far away/Its a far far, far far far fa da da da-da da". Eno's "Oblique Strategies" cards were in heavy use during the

making of the record. Eno had produced a deck of cards with a command printed on each one. Some were more practical and straightforward—"Use an old idea" or "Are there sections? Consider transitions"—others more esoteric—"Honour thy error as a hidden intention" or "Gardening not Architecture". These cards were a kind of formalization and extension of the Dada and Surrealist reliance on contingency, chance, and error in their art-making processes. They riffed on such avant-garde strategies as exquisite corpses, automatic writing, and the cut-up technique.[14] The impact of these avant-garde hijinks on the record are manifold. On "Boys Keep Swinging" the musicians have all switched instruments. "Move On" is a reworking of Bowie's hit song "All the Young Dudes" played backwards, etc. The composition of the tracks also came out of techniques that were used extensively in certain world music styles such as afrobeat and would become hallmarks of hip-hop production—although as always, with an avant-garde twist. According to Thomas Seabrook, "much of the material was built up from loops of the band jamming on the loosest of ideas. According to Sean Mayes, when Bowie then listened back to the tapes in search of a suitable section to loop, he would often 'pick the part with the most mistakes, which when repeated would become an integral part of the song'" (Seabrook 2008, p. 435).

Some of the more practically minded musicians chafed against these experiments. Carlos Alomar, for one, pronounced them "bullshit", but Bowie found them compelling and inspiring. Why? What did he find in them? I would argue that they fulfilled a similar function for Bowie as a parallel set of aesthetic experiments did for David Byrne in the sessions for *Remain in Light* which Talking Heads recorded with Eno shortly after his work on *Lodger.* Byrne had been beset by terrible writer's block and had come to feel trapped by his own subjectivity. For Byrne, a move towards world music, composition centred around looping, a kind of mechanization of the performances ("we were human samplers"), "was a way out of the psychological paranoia and personal torment of the stuff I'd been writing—and feeling—the paranoia of New York in the 70s, my age, my personal stuff, fitting in and not fitting in" (Edward Helmore Talks to Brian Eno and David Byrne 2009). Eno's "art pranks" on *Lodger* offered Bowie a similar kind of depersonalization. They forced him to step outside of himself and to treat the music as something more than personal expression. They helped open Bowie to the world and the Other, forcing the aperture even wider than it had been for "*Heroes*".

The remaining songs on *Lodger*, those that are not explicitly about travel and migration, are political—in the sense of exploring both geopolitical conflict and what we might call the politics of domestic life and gender relations. The two thematic poles of the album—migration and politics—stand in opposition to one another in illuminating and philosophically suggestive ways. Bowie commented on the connections between travel and politics when he noted that, "[t]he more I travel, the less sure I am about exactly which political philosophies are commendable. All my traveling is done on the basis of wanting to get my ideas for writing from real events rather than from going back to a system from whence it came" (O'Leary 2019, pp. 113–16). Migration and displacement led Bowie to an estranged view and deep suspicion of the political verities of his time, and that suspicion is manifested in songs such as "Fantastic Voyage", "Boys Keep Swinging", and "Repetition". These songs connect nationalism to a vacuous and violent masculinity that leads to domestic abuse, the persecution of the Other, and potentially nuclear Armageddon.

In many ways the central song in this regard is "Boys Keep Swinging". While light-sounding and at times comical, it delves deeply into the imbrication of politics, gender, and sexuality. It enumerates the manifold pleasures and privileges of being a boy in the post-war world. These range from sexuality ("Life is a pop of the cherry when you're a boy"), to consumerism ("When you're a boy, you can buy a home of your own/When you're a boy, learn to drive and everything"), to simple favoritism ("you'll get your share", "you are always first on the line"). However, Bowie also tells us that "When you're a boy, you can wear a uniform" and you can "Uncage the colors, unfurl the flag". The culture of male supremacy is also a culture of nationalism and militarism. "Repetition" and "Fantastic Voyage" show the logical extension of this state of affairs. "Repetition"

shows us the protagonist of "Boys Keep Swinging", grown now to a dead-eyed middle age. Despite the promises of a consumerist and masculinist society, he has not found meaning or fulfilment. In spite of relentless work at his dead-end job he can only afford a decrepit Chevy instead of a Cadillac, and he derives no pleasure from his relationships with his wife or children, either. Indeed, he only seems to find refuge from the shattered dreams of a vacuous society in nostalgia and spousal abuse. "Don't hit her", Bowie says to Johnny, the protagonist of the song, when he comes home to find his dinner cold. That this is not an isolated incident becomes clear when the speaker notes that "the bruises won't show if she wears long sleeves/But the space in her eyes shows through". "Fantastic Voyage" shows us a world (our world) where the monstrous figure of "Repetition" has become a world leader. The connection between the two songs is cemented by the fact that they share the same chord progression. In "Fantastic Voyage", "We're learning to live with somebody's depression" but in this case the depression will lead to nuclear war not just a few bruises.

"It's a very modern world/But nobody's perfect/It's a moving world", Bowie sings, bringing us back to the thematics of the migration-focused songs we considered earlier. The modern world is one of transience and movement. This leads inevitably to what might be considered impurity and imperfection, but "that's no reason/To shoot some of those missiles/Think of us as fatherless scum", the speaker continues, growing increasingly angry and indignant. Then, as now, these transient populations are looked at as a blight, as "scum", to be contained, controlled, managed; to be put in camps or wiped off the face of the earth. Bowie takes the side of the dispossessed, seeing them not as "them", as the Other, but as "us". In response to the malignant narcissism of the madmen who rule the world, Bowie responds with empathy and identification. "I'm still getting educated", he sings, perhaps acknowledging his past missteps. If at one time he was absorbed by the Thin White Duke and naively fantasized about supermen and fascist leaders, he now holds these figures with their grandiose pretensions in contempt. "Our lives are valuable too", he insists. And he insists, as well, on the power and importance of art. "I've got to write it down", he says, "And it won't be forgotten".

6. Afterimage: "Where Are We Now?"

On 25 June 2004 Bowie was wrapping up his long and successful Reality Tour at the Hurricane Festival in Scheeßel, Germany. Bowie had started the tour full of energy but had gotten progressively more tired and worn out as it had wound on. During the second to last show in Prague, the singer became ill. He turned pale and began to sweat profusely and his bodyguard had to run out and take him offstage, but Bowie shrugged it off and continued the tour. Two days later, in Scheeßel, feeling sick again, he finished the set with "'Heroes.'" Somehow, he muscled his way through three encores and then collapsed after coming offstage. He was rushed to the hospital where it was determined that he had a badly blocked artery that required an angioplasty. He would never tour again.

Indeed, Bowie appeared to have left music altogether. Apart from a few short appearances he no longer performed, and there was no indication that he was working on new music anymore either. The singer's fans were stunned when on 8 January 2013 at 5AM GMT, Bowie's website uploaded a video for a new track called "Where Are We Now?" with a note that the song could be purchased on iTunes and that an album, ultimately titled *The Next Day*, would follow.

It has emerged since then that the new music was the result of a long process of gestation and collaboration. In the fall of 2010, he reached out to Tony Visconti. "[D]o you fancy doing some demos with me?" he wrote the producer. Invitations to other long-term collaborators would follow and the select crew would work sporadically and in secret for the next few years. It was not clear that anything would come out of these sessions. Echoing what he told the musicians before the *Low* sessions, Bowie noted that these were just experiments and that he might decide to pull the plug at any time. Long-time bassist Tony Levin had no idea that the music was going to be released and learned about it when he heard "Where Are We Now?" on the radio.

"Where Are We Now?" is perhaps an odd choice as a comeback single. It is slow, melancholy, nostalgic. One can imagine that Bowie's record company was not thrilled with this choice. But Bowie had done an end run around the record company. Record executives were not informed of the single until the last minute and Bowie rejected official plans to market and promote the song. This was clearly a work of the heart for the singer.

"Where Are We Now?" returns to Berlin. There is proximity and distance in this return. The lyrics sound like the reflections of someone who knows the city well and is surprised to find how much it has changed. "Had to get the train/From Potsdamer Platz/You never knew that/That I could do that", sings Bowie in the first verse. It is a deceptively simple lyric. When Bowie lived in Berlin, one could not get a train from Potsdamer Platz. The metro station was one of the infamous Geisterbahnhofe—"Ghost stations"—that had ceased functioning because of the Berlin Wall and the division of the city and only reopened after reunification. With these few lines Bowie shows us the gulf that has opened between then and now. He further develops this sentiment in the following lines. "Sitting in the Dschungel/On Nürnberger Strasse", he sings referring to a notorious nightclub where he once partied with Iggy Pop and others. "A man lost in time/Near KaDeWe/Just walking the dead". The speaker, conceivably Bowie himself, moves through the streets of Berlin. They are crowded with the ghosts of the people and places that once existed there. The city has become a palimpsest. A memnopolis.

The video of the song, made by the artist Tony Oursler, captures this nostalgic and wistful mood. It features Bowie and Oursler's wife, the artist Jacqueline Humphries, chosen apparently because of her similarity to Bowie's PA during the Berlin years, Corinne "Coco" Schwab, as conjoined puppets sitting on a pommel horse in a cluttered artist's studio. The piles of bric-a-brac serve as physical analogues of the detritus of memory or the detritus of the ruined Berlin of yesteryear. As Bowie sings, black and white footage of Berlin is projected onto a screen behind them. The footage has the grainy quality of memory and shows key sites mentioned in the song—The Kaufhaus des Westens department store (abbreviated as KaDeWe), the Dschungel nightclub—as well as sites of personal significance to Bowie. Most notably, we see the auto repair shop above which Bowie lived with Iggy Pop. This mood of nostalgia is also captured by what Mark Richardson referred to as "the scotch-soaked after-hours musical backing" (Richardson n.d.). It is down tempo and piano dominant and evokes a jazz standard or cabaret music. It is, perhaps, like "Subterraneans" a vague reference to the jazz scene of East Berlin, now nothing but a ghostly memory.

Should this record be seen, then, as not only a return to the topography of *Low* era Berlin, but to the sensibility of that album as well? With its nostalgic yearning and self-mythologization, does "Where Are We Now?" represent a move back to an intensely personal, perhaps even solipsistic world? In "When Are We Now? Walls and Memory in David Bowie's Berlins", Tiffany Naiman convincingly argues that this is not the case. She claims that "while most journalistic writing about 'Where Are We Now?' has treated the song as a solely personal narrative, another possible interpretation is to understand it as a rare moment of political commentary from David Bowie" (Cinque et al. 2015, p. 305). The overwhelming focus on the song as private memory is surprising because in the second verse, Bowie himself moves from the personal to the social and political. He sings:

> Twenty thousand people
> Cross Bösebrücke
> Fingers are crossed
> Just in case

The Bösebrücke is a bridge that once housed the Bornholmerstrasse border crossing between East and West Germany. On the evening of 9 November 1989, as news spread of the removal of border controls by the GDR, massive crowds of East Germans gathered at the Bornholmerstrasse border crossing demanding that the border guards let them through to West Berlin. Surprised and overwhelmed but unwilling to use force, the guards ultimately opened the gates, allowing 20,000 to cross the bridge and enter the West. The song efficiently documents this pivotal moment in the fall of the Berlin Wall. It captures the

tension of that moment—the uncertainty on the part of the crowds whether there might be violence and bloodshed—and their hope that life would get better.

However, for Naiman, the song is not just a reflection on the history of Berlin. It is also a meditation on "post-Wall Berlin as a synecdoche for the melancholy of postmodern life under neoliberal capitalism" (Cinque et al. 2015, p. 305). Crucial for Naiman is the line "Where Are We Now?"—a question with personal resonances of course, but also one that forces a kind of social, political, and cultural reckoning. For Naiman, as listeners consider where they are today, they are forced to confront the reality that "the Wall was torn down, but little was built from its destruction . . . Solemnly singing 'Where Are We Now?' turns the dirge into art that can be read as political critique, clearly questioning neoliberal capitalism and its ability to radically alter the architecture and culture of a city" (Cinque et al. 2015, p. 312).

By way of conclusion, I would like to supplement this reading by addressing the song's nostalgia, turning to the more complex understanding of nostalgia developed by Svetlana Boym.[15] Boym argues that nostalgia is a more varied phenomenon than it is commonly understood to be. While some iterations of nostalgia—notably what Boym refers to as "restorative nostalgia"—manifest themselves as a melancholy fixation on the past, other varieties of nostalgia are oriented quite differently. "Reflective nostalgia" is a more ironic and self-conscious relationship to the past that has the potential to open up new paths towards the future. "The past", writes Boym, "is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding of some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historical development" (Boym 2001, p. 50). In place of a compulsive flight to a reified past, reflective nostalgia proposes a dialogical negotiation of past and present that can power progressive or even utopic articulations of the future.

The reflective nostalgia of "Where Are We Now?" is a key point of connection between this late work and Bowie's Berlin triptych. Reflecting on the Berlin records Bowie mused that the music was imbued with a "sense of yearning for a future that we all knew would never come to pass" (Hughes 2017). This is a very complex construction—the music became a nostalgic lament for an imagined future as a means of moving into a better real future. In "Where Are We Now?" Bowie uses nostalgia for a mythical past for similar purposes.

As Tiffany Naiman has argued, "this period of Bowie's time in Berlin has evolved into a myth, conjured in films, magazines and across the internet, told and retold as a period of pure artistic genius when he '. . . produced the most courageous music of his life.'" Bowie's Berlin, then, has become a signifier of authenticity, creativity, and community at a time when these values have increasingly come under threat by forces such as commodification, cultural homogenization, and social atomism. By stimulating nostalgia for this period in his listeners, Bowie forces them to ask, "where are we now?" and by feeling acutely the gap between an idealized past and an unsatisfying present, he encourages them to leap into a different future.

The song performs this very leap in the outro. As drummer Zachary Alford switches into a martial rhythm, the song seems to jerk awake from its nostalgic torpor. The heavily processed guitar begins to soar in ways that echo the classic guitar part from "Heroes". "As long as there's sun", Bowie sings. "As long as there's rain", "As long as there's fire". Each line doubled. It is a sharp change of imagery—from transient cultural and political realities to enduring elemental ones. And then, finally, "As long as there's me/As long as there's you". As long as there's me, as long as there's you—then what? The question is left unanswered, but the shift in the lyrical register and the anthemic turn in the music leave little doubt. There will be hope, possibility, a better future.

Thirty-six years earlier Bowie had arrived in Berlin, shattered and self-absorbed. He left a different person—transformed by the encounters and experiences the city afforded him. Nearing the end of his life he would retrace this journey once again and offer it up as a gift for his listeners. From the subjective to the objective, the Self to the Other, the past to the future. The legacy of Berlin lives on.

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Notes

1 See David Buckley, "Revisiting Bowie's Berlin" in (Devereux et al. 2015) as an example of some of the reservations I explore in this introduction.

2 On Bowie's acting career, see Julie Lobalzo Wright, "David Bowie: The Extraordinary Rock Star as Film Star", in (Devereux et al. 2015).

3 For two very different psychoanalytic interpretations of Bowie's fractured subjectivity, see Tanja Stark, "'Crashing Out with Sylvian': David Bowie, Carl Jung, and the Unconscious" and Ana Leorne, "Dear Dr Freud—David Bowie Hits the Couch: A psychoanalytic approach to some of his personae". Both essays in (Devereux et al. 2015).

4 On the ambiguous influence of Kraftwerk on Bowie, see Buckley, "Revisiting Bowie's Berlin" in (Devereux et al. 2015, p. 226). Uncut magazine also explored the Bowie/Kraftwerk connection: "'Station to Station preceded Trans-Europe Express by quite some time,' says Bowie, speaking exclusively to Uncut in January 2001, arguing that his synthetic fusion of R'n'B and electronica was poles apart from Kraftwerk's ordered machine symphonies. But he does salute Kraftwerk's 'determination to stand apart from stereotypical American chord sequences and their wholehearted embrace of a European sensibility displayed through their music'" (Hughes 2017). For the general influence of Kruatrock see (Stubbs 2015).

5 For a more extensive discussion of Bowie's modernist influences see Johnson, "David Bowie Is" in (Devereux et al. 2015, p. 13).

6 According to Ana Leorne, this type of exploitation was typical of the psychopathology of the Thin White Duke period. The "paranoia and craziness" of that era "led him to use 'others' in order to reach his goals—be they real people of simply his personae". See Leorne, "Dear Dr Freud" in (Devereux et al. 2015, p. 119). I will argue that the Berlin period would lead to a radical shift in Bowie's relationship to the Other.

7 On Bowie's fascination with Expressionism, see Kathryn Johnson, "David Bowie Is", p. 13 and Aileen Dillane et al., "Culminating Sounds and (En)visions: *Ashes to Ashes* and the case for Pierrot", pp. 38–43. Both essays in (Devereux et al. 2015).

8 Others have been more skeptical of this turn and have seen the Bowie of Berlin as yet another persona. David Buckley notes that "what Bowie did was the sort of things he saw everyday Berliners do. His initial 'costume' of short-cropped hair, short-trimmed moustache, checked shirt and cap, in hindsight looks almost like a Bowie character, a distillation of what he saw as being what a young, arty Berliner might wear". This is what we might call the postmodern, as opposed to the modernist, Bowie. But, ultimately Buckley writes about *Low* in autobiographical terms and presents it as an intensely personal album that grapples with the trauma of LA and its fallout. See Buckley, "Revisiting Bowie's Berlin" in (Devereux et al. 2015, pp. 218–21). For a discussion of the "modernist" versus "postmodern" Bowie, see Baker, "Bowie's Covers: The Artist as Modernist" in (Cinque et al. 2015).

9 Buckley has a similar interpretation of these lines: "The lyric hints at Bowie's sense of growing futility, a man trapped, cursed, programmed to make the same mistakes". See Buckley, "Revisiting Bowie's Berlin" in (Devereux et al. 2015, p. 221). It was, of course, Freud who argued that even though some give "the impression of being pursued by a malignant fate or possessed by some 'daemonic' power . . . psychoanalysis has always taken the view that their fate is for the most part arranged by themselves[.]" This is the famous repetition compulsion which overrides the pleasure principle and works at the service of the death drive. See (Freud 1961, p. 15).

10 Bowie had had a longstanding fascination with Japan. See, for example, Helen Marie Thian, "Moss Garden: David Bowie and Japonism in fashion in the 1970s" in (Devereux et al. 2015).

11 In "Ziggy's Urban Alienation: Assembling the Heroic Outside", Ian Chapman considers the theme of alienation in Bowie's work and the recurrence of outsider figures. Interestingly, he does not make a connection to the alienated displaced persons on *Lodger*. See Chapman, "Ziggy's Urban Alienation: Assembling the Heroic Outside", in (Cinque et al. 2015).

12 In a review at the time, Jon Savage damned the album with faint praise. "*Lodger* is a nice enough pop record, beautifully played, produced and crafted, and slightly faceless. Is Bowie that interesting? . . . Projection: will the Eighties really be this boring?" See (Savage 1979).

13 For a parallel interpretation see Buckley, "Revisiting Bowie's Berlin" in (Devereux et al. 2015, p. 217).

14 For the importance of avant-garde strategies such as Surrealist contingency and Burroughs's cut up technique, see Kathryn Johnson, "David Bowie Is" in (Devereux et al. 2015).

15 See Boym's magisterial *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books), 2001. I have explored this topic elsewhere. See for example my "Paris, Capital of Nostalgia" in (Huebner et al. 2020). For Bowie and nostalgia see (Waldrep 2016).

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